New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Listed alphabetically are the names of actors and actresses in shows opening during the year 1956. The number opposite the name indicates the pages on which each is found in NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS. We regret that we cannot include the various cast changes, but can only give the opening night casts as published in the New York newspapers.

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"Protective Custody"

Journal-American

December 29, 1956

Faye Emerson In Superb Job

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS PARISHIONER has for long regarded it his duty to judge shows on the simple basis of his own acceptance of them as an average, slightly tough, theatre-goer. This is done always with the knowledge that intangibles affect the final success of a play, that while he and many dedicated fans may agree, the mood of the moment may be out of joint.

A case in point is "Protective Custody," a new play by Howard Richardson and William Berney which Anderson Lawler presented at the Ambassador Theatre last night. Here is a brilliant production and a thoughtful drama, featuring a towering performance by Faye Emerson and a matching contribution from Fritz Weaver.

Peter Larkin's overwhelming set is a monument (revolving, at that) to the sinister elements of the proceedings, and Herbert Berghof's staging is always inventive and valid.

Despite all this there is the cloying sense that the subject, the necessarily laggard and often repetitive manner in which it is developed, even the tortuous movement of the big set, may not gain popular approval. The pace is slow, it is a highly intelligent evening, but it is also depressing.

Nothing, however, can detract from the eminence of Miss Emerson's portrayal of a lady correspondent undergoing a brain wash behind the Iron Curtain.

From the chic figure that has emblazoned many a TV panel, she deteriorates into a crone with hair like a hay-stack, dressed in a shapeless prison frock. This lady is an actress of stature and her efforts will be long remembered, if the play is not.

As the defaulting Briton who has been assigned to erase her reason Fritz Weaver gives a fluid and delightfully corrupt impersonation, and Thayer David is always repulsive as a Teutonic doctor. Other excellent assists are offered by Barbara Lester, Mitchell Erickson, Oliver Berg, Olga Bielinska and Howard Wierum.

I enjoyed the show, I applaud the performances and I respect the production. It doesn't, however, impress me as a hit—and I hope I'm wrong.

"PROTECTIVE CUSTODY"

Play by Howard Richardson and William Berney; staged by Herbert Berghof; settings and costumes by Peter Larkin; lighting by Lee Watson; presented by Anderson Lawler in association with Will Lester Productions at the Ambassador Theatre, December 28, 1956. The cast:

1st Attendant... Howard Wierum
Marc Bradley..... Fritz Weaver
Dr. Wilhelm Steidl.. Thayer David
Helen Merrick... Olga Bielinska
Dolly Barns..... Faye Emerson
A Nun..... Barbara Lester
2nd Attendant.. Mitchell Erickson
Robert Fuller..... Oliver Berg

DAILY NEWS

December 29, 1956

'Protective Custody' a Clinical, Unexciting Brainwashing Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Howard Richardson and William Berney, who some years ago wrote a pleasant hillbilly fantasy about a witch boy called "Dark of the Moon," have become intently serious in writing "Protective Custody." This long drama concerns brain-washing beyond the iron curtain. At last evening's premiere at the Ambassador Theatre there was some question in my mind as to whose brain was being washed—Faye Emerson's or mine.

It was a tough evening for Miss Emerson and me. I had to sit through her 18 months of mental and moral destruction at the hands of a slick inquisitor, and she had to act it out. She was the stronger character, for she acted her role ably and sincerely, whilst I, as her audience, failed to become excited or even interested.

Confesses All

"Protective Custody" is more a clinical document than a play. Miss Emerson, as an American newspaper woman, is imprisoned somewhere east of West Germany and is asked to confess that her hard-hitting dispatches have been treacherous lies—and that her personal life with a couple of husbands has been a lie, too.

Her inquisitor, a British renegade played smoothly by Fritz Weaver, breaks her down in a year and a half (it seemed longer to me) to the point where she falls in love with him and doesn't want to return to America. But he forces her to go home because she has been so thoroughly brainwashed and indoctrinated that she will be an excellent propaganda agent in her homeland.

Round and Round

The insurmountable trouble with the play is that all the scenes are alike. First Weaver has a go at Miss Emerson in his office, chipping away at her spiritual resistance, and then she is taken to her cell to be starved and mentally abused by a heartless female attendant.

Peter Larkin has devised a pictorially and mechanically effective turntable setting for the alternation of these scenes—but the set becomes a slow-motion merry-go-round as what appears to be the same scene comes around time after time.

By the end of the performance last evening I was ready to confess. I now confess, reluctantly and sorrowfully, that "Protective Custody" bored the bejaspers out of me.

The New York Times

December 29, 1956

Theatre: Save Faye!

Miss Emerson Seen in 'Protective Custody'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHAT are they doing to Faye Emerson?

In "Protective Custody," which opened at the Ambassador last evening, she makes her first entrance as we all know her—a handsome woman in glamorous evening attire, radiating success and self-confidence. But Howard Richardson and William Berney, authors of the play, do not reverence American womanhood.

First they snip off Miss Emerson's hair. Then they dress her in a shapeless meal sack, cotton stockings and clumsy shoes, and deprive her of an American woman's quota of make-up. Before the play is half over, our Faye is trudging through the scenery like a refugee from "Tobacco Road." What do they think they are doing to Faye Emerson?

They think they are illustrating the brutality, craft and dishonesty of brainwashing methods in a Soviet correction center. They present Miss Emerson as a fabulous foreign correspondent whose well-known column, "The Man Behind the Door," has embarrassed the Soviet Government and compelled it to kidnap her and reorganize her brains. Fritz Weaver, a dashing actor with a warm voice and a rare profile, is in charge of remaking her personality according to the latest psychological methods.

•

Since this sort of thing does go on in the world today, one ought to listen respectfully to what the authors are saying. But they make it difficult. In the first place, they have persuaded Peter Larkin to construct a sort of behemoth setting that grinds and groans on revolving stage apparatus and carries us back and forth through the aisles, offices and cells of the prison. It is a mechanical monstrosity, equipped with a switch that lifts or drops a bridge across the castle moat, floodlights that turn at the flick of the wrist, voice recording machinery and everything that a good melodramatist desires.

In the second place, Miss Emerson appears to have been an unreliable correspondent who prints gossip as fact and slants her stories. In the third place the method the inquisitor uses is that nostrum of the current drama—Psychoanalysis, which solves all problems scientifically and dispenses with the craft of playwriting.

•

"Protective Custody" is a long play that believes in leaving nothing unsaid. Some of the things it says are literally important. But nothing it says is important enough to justify dressing Faye Emerson in a torn sweater patched at the elbows and turning her into an ugly creature. We do have standards in America. A handsome woman must not be treated shabbily.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 29, 1956

The Long Ordeal Of Miss Emerson

By TOM DONNELLY.

It's no fun at all, having to watch a nice girl like Faye Emerson suffer, and suffer, and suffer. In "Protective Custody" (at the Ambassador) Miss Emerson plays an American newspaper woman named Dolly Barns, who falls into the hands of some beasts behind the Iron Curtain and gets brainwashed for a thousand days and a thousand nights.

(Actually, the duration of Dolly's ordeal isn't specified, but I can't help feeling that the span I've mentioned is a conservative estimate.)

Dolly, we are told, is a girl with 20,000,000 readers who number at least one Pulitzer Prize among her souvenirs. She is the author of a column called "The Man Behind the Door." This label is something Dolly has invented to pin on the political evildoers of our time, the shadowy monsters who hatch plots against humanity.

Dolly's Trials.

As "Protective Custody" opens, Dolly is dragged into a convent which has been converted by an unnamed power into a "hospital for thought reform." At first Dolly is full of defiant wisecracks, like all the great female reporters of stage, screen and story, but a wily inquisitor goes to work on her, and Dolly begins to crumble.

First, she stops wisecracking, which is a great pity under the gloomy circumstances.

Dolly is stripped of the evening gown she was wearing when she was kidnaped (the fashion-conscious ladies in my vicinity felt this was a good move, since they said they had never seen a more becoming outfit) and encased in a sack.

Her hair is cut off, or at least her chignon is cut off, and from this point onward she is subjected to every conceivable mental and physical harrassment.

Drat That Freud.

Ultimately, and I do mean ultimately, Dolly is badgered into confessing that during all those years when she was exposing the Machiavellis of our time, she was only getting back at her mother's second husband for assaulting her in her girlhood. It is not Stalin or Hitler who is the man behind Dolly's Freudian door, it is her mother's second husband.

Well, gosh!

Dolly's brain doesn't stay permanently washed, I hasten to assure you. The Iron Curtain gang is defeated in time for the finale. Nothing becomes "Protective Custody" like the ending of it.

To be fair, the authors of this work, Howard Richardson and William Berney, haven't composed a real disaster of the caliber of, say, "Harbor Lights." They have achieved an earnest, well-intentioned, but boring and essentially futile variation on a theme which has been much better handled in such items as "Darkness at Noon" and "The Prisoner."

The Set Is Busy.

Peter Larkin's setting for "Protective Custody" deserves special mention. It is a large, busy, revolving arrangement of stained glass windows and dungeons and stairs, and as it went grinding and squeaking on its laborious way last night it provided me with moments of real apprehension. I was constantly afraid that the heaving and visible stagehands, and the scampering actors, might get hopelessly entangled in it.

Miss Emerson, who has not impressed me in the past as an artist of brilliant gifts, does some really first-rate work in this painful marathon, and she is ably assisted by Fritz Weaver as the inquisitor, and by Thayer David, Barbara Lester, and Olga Bielinska, as assorted unsavory types.

New York Post

December 30, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Grim Drama of a Brainwashed Lady

There haven't been many more harrowing dramas than "Protective Custody," which opened Friday night at the Ambassador Theater. The new play by Howard Richardson and William Berney about brainwashing behind the Iron Curtain is also intense and relentlessly upsetting, and it is splendidly acted by Faye Emerson and Fritz Weaver. If, in the end, the unrelieved sense of depression lacks the emotionally purging effect of authentic tragedy, it is not for lack of honesty but through a curious failure of its ending to be persuasively or satisfyingly dramatic.

Such studiously unrelenting tension demands a quality of impressiveness in the writing and the resolution of the narrative if it is to be completely effective in terms of the drama, and I think "Protective Custody" fails to achieve that important final sense of catharsis, if you'll forgive an academic word. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that the new play grips the complete attention of the audience at the start, holds it with vise-like power in its truly harrowing spell, and, even toward the close, never quite lets go of its compelling forcefulness.

The Two Agents

What the authors have to tell is of a dashing and self-confident American newspaperwoman who is kidnaped by the Russians from Berlin, rushed into captivity in a former convent in East Germany and subjected to the brainwashing processes of two Soviet agents. One is an ex-Nazi whose methods are brutal and direct. The other is a subtle British renegade who pretends to kindness and sympathy and sets out to win the captive's confidence. He, of course, is the dangerous opponent, and, as the ex-Nazi says, he combines the scientific theories of Freud and Pavlov.

His plan is to break down the unfortunate lady's self-confidence, and he slowly and inexorably sets out to probe into her subconscious mind and persuade her that her anti-Communist writings have been the result, not of genuine conviction, but of frustrated and embittered sexual repressions. I am not giving away any of the play's secrets to say that he almost wins. He does break her spirit and he does convince her that she has been a victim of her own secret desires, and she even goes so far as to start falling seriously in love with him.

The Ending

Five minutes before the final curtain fell, I was still uncertain as to how things were going to end, and I certainly don't intend to tell you here. But don't insult the authors by suspecting that they close with the sentimental picture of a villain reformed by love. But, in its own way, their conclusion is a little sentimental, and not quite persuasive. Yet the grim spell remains, and the many scenes between tormenter and victim never lose their cruel intensity. In comparison, "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Shrike" are virtually merry little larks.

In her previous adventures in the theater, Miss Emerson has never revealed any sign of the conviction and power she reveals here. Fritz Weaver, an actor of striking force, is enormously good as the British renegade, and, in the smaller role of the ex-Nazi, Thayer David offers another of his fine performances. Peter Larkin's setting of the former convent is impressive, but I thought its noisy mechanics tended to interfere with the play's terrible sense of reality. "Protective Custody" is a passionately gripping play, even though it lacks the final note of high dramatic satisfaction.

New York Herald Tribune

December 29, 1956

THEATER

'Protective Custody'

By WALTER KERR

IN "PROTECTIVE CUSTODY," the masters of a "large city behind the Iron Curtain" are awfully mean to Faye Emerson—snipping off her long blonde braids, ripping away her massive evening clothes, snatching her earrings right out of their sockets, even stealing her typewriter—but she wasn't the one I felt sorry for.

Mostly, I felt sorry for five or six slightly visible stagehands who were required, more or less in the manner invented by the pyramid-building Pharaohs, to trundle Peter Larkin's creaking, grinding, towering set around on its turntable some twenty-five or thirty times before their ghastly labor was done. Good work, men, and a well-deserved rest to you.

• • •

Next, I felt sorry for a young man who was required to play "Lili Marlene" on an accordion while hunched deep beneath the flying buttresses of Mr. Larkin's ancient "Convent of the Bleeding Heart." When it was time for us to get rid of this lad and go on to the upstairs horrors of the evening, the turntable turned—but not quite far enough to allow our hero a decent escape from view. The subsequent wriggling into the upstage wings would have been a credit to Harry Houdini.

Oh, well, I guess I felt sorry for everybody, including Faye Emerson.

• • •

Dramatists Howard Richardson and William Berney have caught hold of material that is in itself timely and fascinating: the business of 'voluntary' confessions extorted from apparently normal citizen of the west. They have gone quite exhaustively into the matter of methods: solitary confinement, secret guilts, revolving lights, and even the inducement of romantic passion. They have, in short, projected onto the stage an aspect of our time, and a sequence of events, that are all quite possibly true—and then made them wholly unbelievable.

• • •

This tidy miracle is managed by the simple expedient of draping a genuine contemporary horror in the propaganda-poster images and the juicy rhetoric of a pre-World War I melodrama ("The Beast of East Berlin," something like that). When captive journalist Faye Emerson is hoodwinked into thinking that she has spoken to a member of the American Embassy, the chap she has spilled her heart to turns—once the girl has been led away—to her principal tormentor, raises his wine-glass, and clinks out a heartfelt "Comrade!"

When Miss Emerson is invited to pray in her cell, she mutters—in the idiom of a grown-up and slightly mauled Little Eva—"I don't know any prayers. I haven't said any since I was a little girl." She can get through "Now I lay me down to sleep," though.

A little later, however, she discovers that she can no longer get through the Gettysburg Address, which fact gives us our shattering second-act climax. Meantime, a snarling, leering, very guttural crewcut villain is describing an earlier assassination (by hypodermic) with the immortal words, "The girl I killed I had slept with the week before." And Fritz Weaver, as an inquisitor with an emotional problem of his own, is writhing on a couch while an amplified sound track (his subconscious, I believe) remembers a night—and a girl—that caused him to say "Go on—go on—hold her, naked as a saint!" The feeling of urgent contemporary life drains away, somehow.

Mr. Weaver is actually quite good in his clipped, controlled, politely sadistic way. Miss Emerson, unbecomingly dressed to begin with and quite a sight later on, has a whale of a time battering her head and her fists against floors, ceilings and furniture. You cannot say that the part is badly acted, just that it is only acted—with nothing real or personal to relieve the hysteria. Olga Bielinska is reasonably effective as a 're-educated' college girl, but Thayer David—accent or no accent—is never going to replace Eric von Stroheim in my loyal heart.

Daily Mirror
December 29, 1956

'Protective Custody' Isn't Too Arresting

By JUSTIN GILBERT

A pretty female brainwash victim of Communist inquisitors implies a certain amount of novelty, the most evident virtue of "Protective Custody," which opened Friday at the Ambassador.

For there is no reason to deny that Faye Emerson certainly makes in at least the physical sense a more eye-filling object of compassion than Claude Rains in "Darkness at Noon" or Alec Guinness in "The Prisoner."

* * *

YET MANY OF the props and the circumstances are similar, since "Protective Custody" is concerned solely with the mental and spiritual deterioration of a prisoner at the hands of Iron Curtain agents.

In the beginning, we see Miss Emerson brought to an imposing building that was once a convent. Now it is the brain center of cold and clinical oppressors, anxious to wring a confession from her that she has written nothing but lies about Soviet puppets for the American newspapers whom she represents.

Little by little, the desired changes are wrought. She has her fashionable evening gown torn from her; she is partially tonsured. She is kept in a gloomy cell and attended by a churl garbed as a nun. Time becomes meaningless.

* * *

ANOTHER American girl who has been thoroughly brainwashed is placed near her as a potential bellwether.

Then the cool, meticulously dressed English renegade who has deserted the British Foreign Office for allegiance to the Kremlin, goes to work on her with devastating results.

Miss Emerson cracks up.

What more would you expect? And that, precisely, is the shortcoming of this new play by Howard Richardson and William Berney. Nowhere, except very weakly close to curtain fall, does it take an unexpected turn.

AS A DRAMATIC exercise for Miss Emerson, who essays hapless newshen Dolly Barns, and Fritz Weaver as her interrogator, "Protective Custody" has its moments. Both are effective. Miss Emerson especially so—but the play follows a path that has already been thoroughly trod before footlights.

Great credit, however, must be given to Peter Larkin for an unusual set that helps to sustain the mood of terror: a revolving bit of circular scenery that enables the audience to see the Star Chamber room of the convent one moment and its cellar cells the next.

Thayer David's role of an ex-Gestapo doctor consists chiefly of lower lip aggression and scowls, a representation that isn't too exotic. Olga Bielinska as the other American prisoner does well with a small part.

Outstanding is Barbara Lester, an English girl, as the bogus nun, who conveys crudeness and wile in forceful fashion.

"Troilus and Cressida"

New York Post
December 27, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Prankish 'Troilus and Cressida'

The London Old Vic Company, usually so sedate and safely conventional about Shakespeare, kicks over the traces and goes on quite a spree in its production of "Troilus and Cressida," which opened last night at the Winter Garden. This rarely seen play, which makes pygmies out of the heroes of the Trojan War, is one of the Bard's most curious, difficult and, to get right down to it, dissatisfying works, and it probably requires strenuous measures to enliven it. The ideas of the prankish visitors don't always work out, but they do result in an odd and arresting show.

Tyrone Guthrie, who staged it, has given the performance some of the farcical wildness of "The Matchmaker" and he has decked it out in the costumes of the turn of this century, with the Trojans rather resembling the English and the Greeks the Germans in their pre-1914 military regalia. Mr. Guthrie has given some philosophical justifications for his radical move, but I don't think we need take his explanations too seriously. What he was chiefly interested in was the freshness and novelty his scheme provided, and it certainly enables his actors to cut loose with abandon.

War and Lechery

On the other hand, the preoccupation with being unconventional also causes them to sacrifice the play's lyricism, and it is only on rare occasions, such as in the great speech wherein Ulysses talks of the cruel pranks played by time, that the Shakespearean eloquence emerges with proper forcefulness. But "Troilus and Cressida" is not basically a beautifully lyric play. It is essentially savage, satirical, sardonic and wearily bitter, a drama that looks on love and war, its essential ingredients, in terms of cold lechery and stupid brutality, and the current version captures much of its ironical mockery in the company's farcical maneuvers.

Although I suspect that the prankishness of the staging and playing gets more than a little out of hand and tends to surrender the disillusioned bitterness in the interest of comic outlandishness, there is no doubt of its enlivening advantages. And, for all of Mr. Guthrie's fooling, one never is permitted to lose sight of the fact that Troilus is an oaf, Cressida a wanton, Achilles a brutal scoundrel, Ajax an imbecile, Nestor an old bore, and Pandarus a fellow worthy of his name.

Indeed, the only characters who possess any particular merit are Hector and Ulysses, with another possible exception in the case of the cynical and bitter-tongued Thersites, who here becomes the first of the war correspondents. "Troilus and Cressida" is emphatically not a likable play. It isn't a particularly good one, either; it is diffuse, clumsy, badly organized and rather tired in its contemptuous disillusionment. Nevertheless, there is something inescapably fascinating in its jaundiced view of war and lechery and its obvious distaste for insect humanity.

There are a number of effective performances. Paul Rogers is both comic and repulsive as Pandarus, John Neville is wonderfully grubby and scornful as Thersites, and there is excellent work by Rosemary Harris as Cressida, Jeremy Brett as Troilus, Jack Gwillim as Hector, Richard Wordsworth as Ulysses, Job Stewart as Nestor, Ernest Hare as Ajax and Charles Gray as Achilles. And the production is pictorially effective. Mr. Guthrie's studiously antic staging of a stubborn and embittered play doesn't altogether succeed, but it is always alive.

"TROILUS AND CRESSIDA"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Tyrone Guthrie; costumes and decor by Frederick Crooke; presented by the Old Vic Trust Ltd, and the Arts Council of Great Britain under the sponsorship of Sol Hurok at the Winter Garden Theatre, December 26, 1956. The cast:

Priam.....Keith Taylor
Hector.....Jack Gwillim
Troilus.....Jeremy Brett
Paris.....Ronald Allen
Aeneas.....Denis Holmes
Pandarus.....Paul Rogers
Cressida's groom..Aubrey Morris
Troilus' servant..John Greenwood
Helen.....Coral Browne
Andromache.....Jennifer Wilson
Cassandra..Margaret Courtenay
Cressida.....Rosemary Harris
Agamemnon.....Rupert Davies
Menelaus.....Edward Harvey
Ulysses....Richard Wordsworth
Nestor.....Job Stewart
Ajax.....Ernest Hare
Achilles.....Charles Gray
Patroclus.....Derek New
Thersites.....John Neville

The New York Times

December 27, 1956

Theatre: Mars Is Mauled

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NO man to get into a rut, Tyrone Guthrie has played a few tricks on Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida," which was acted by the Old Vic Company at the Winter Garden last evening.

He has costumed the Trojans like ceremonial British guards of about the World War I period, and the Greeks like Prussian officers of the same time. Since Shakespeare's spleenish comedy has an anti-heroic attitude toward Homer's illustrious fighting men, Mr. Guthrie has all the authority he needs to belittle these modern warriors. Not that Mr. Guthrie needs authority at any time. All he needs is an opportunity to drive boredom away.

He is very funny when he is cartooning the bravura ritual of warriors who regard fighting as the cavalier's duty. The stamping of feet when the characters execute turns, the fierce saluting, the pompous mannerisms, the monocles, the swagger sticks, the flamboyant uniforms designed by Frederick Crooke—are vastly entertaining and the worst dig in the ribs that Mars has encountered on the stage for some time.

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But it seems to this theatregoer that Mr. Guthrie's assault on tradition is only successful in part. His humor is heartier than Shakespeare's. He is, as always, in high spirits. But "Troilus and Cressida" is the comedy of a man who is in low spirits, who has lost faith in the world, who is full of disgust and who is writing liverish verse.

The difference between Shakespeare's mood and Mr. Guthrie's is not just a matter of taste. It affects the relationship between his production and the dialogue. Especially in the first act, his production makes the dialogue sound like gibberish. What the characters do is frequently amusing. What they say makes no sense at all. Mr. Guthrie and Shakespeare are not always on the same stage.

Since "Troilus and Cressida" is one of Shakespeare's least attractive plays, it is seldom acted. On Broadway it has been acted only once in the last quarter-century, and then only for a fleeting run. But it is as good a comedy as "All's Well That Ends Well" and "Measure for Measure," and it would be pleasant to have a conventional view of it now that the Old Vic Company is here.

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When the actors have a moment to act the drama they are excellent. As Cressida, Rosemary Harris is admirable. Her slow, sensual, treacherous strumpet is everything that Shakespeare had in mind. Jeremy Brett's youthful, eager Troilus who can hardly believe Cressida's treachery—is also a first-rate bit of straightforward acting. Jack Gwillim's manly Hector, Charles Gray's peevish Achilles, Richard Wordsworth's perceptive Ulysses, Rupert Davies' bland Agamemnon—suggest that the Old Vic could make a considerable impression on Shakespeare's script if they could put their minds to it.

Mr. Guthrie's practical joke also has good representation in the acting. Paul Rogers' foppish, garrulous Pandarus is most entertaining. So is Ernest Hare's notion of Ajax as a military stuffed shirt, John Neville's interpretation of Thersites as a rag-bag war correspondent and Coral Browne's sketch of Helen of Troy as a night club hussy.

They fit most neatly into Mr. Guthrie's comic-book plan. But his plan is only half successful. Every now and then Shakespeare's drama has vitality enough to push it aside and rail against the world. The actors are talented, and could make "Troilus and Cressida" interesting in its own right. Mr. Guthrie's prank is not a sufficient substitute.

Journal-American

December 27, 1956

Old Vic in a Merry Romp

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE OLD VIC COMPANY is obviously having a good time with their wayward production of Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida," which they launched at the Winter Garden last night, and the spoofery is contagious. The clients were in obvious agreement.

This gifted group, which has already given us a thoughtful and often brilliant repertory of several of The Bard's more popular efforts, herein takes its hair down and plays for plain satire.

The time has been transposed to the Edwardian Era, somewhere around the turn of the Century, and the characters are permitted a freedom of expression and behavior which would ill become the cloak-and-sandal adornments of the Homeric period in which it was originally laid.

Elements Unhampered

The warring factors are the Trojans and the Greeks, but the actors are dressed in the uniforms commonly associated with the Crimean unpleasantness. This is flattering to the combatants, to the civilians who wear cut-aways and gray top hats and the ladies in their billowy evening gowns, and it has a basic importance in the play.

This was Shakespeare's manner of having fun about War and Sex, something which is hardly humorous today. In switching the time to the 19th Century, when professional armies went to War in a spirit of sport and the lines of moral behavior were less clearly drawn, the comedic elements are unhampered.

Paul Rogers has a field day in the role of Pandarus, uncle of Cressida. He plays the part as an aging effeminate, a delineation which never alters the flow of speech and adds immeasurably to its satiric value.

Jeremy Brett is a handsome and necessarily straightforward Troilus and Rosemary Harris is a most beguiling Cressida. She has great good looks and transmits a large load of the physical decibles without which the play would flounder.

Other notable contributions are offered by Charles Gray, Richard Wordsworth, Rupert Davies, James Villiers and John Neville.

As always the settings are stark, but Frederick Crooke has devised an attractive two-level inset for the second act which serves as a background for Miss Harris's period strip-tease. Frederick Marshall has devised some suitable and unobtrusive offstage music, and it seemed to me that Tyrone Guthrie had done an enormous job in interpreting the characters and guiding them in the department of a vastly changed era.

The eminence of the Old Vic company hardly needs added heralding at this juncture, but this production of "Troilus and Cressida" finds them at their off-beat best. It is a mad and merry romp.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 27, 1956

THEATER

'Troilus and Cressida'

By WALTER KERR

AS MAGNESIUM-FLASHES explode, sirens whine, and Prussian soldiers with fixed bayonets charge down the aisles of the Winter Garden Theater, a seedy civilian named Thersites crawls around the battlefield on his hands and knees with a 1914 Kodak, taking snapshots.

Basically, I think that's what director Tyrone Guthrie is doing, too. For Shakespeare's rarely produced and exceedingly difficult "Troilus and Cressida," he has imagined what a family album of Greeks and Trojans would look like during the years immediately preceding World War I.

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Helen of Troy, for instance, strikes Mr. Guthrie as a beer-hall prima donna, her blonde hair piled high on her arrogant head, her stockings gaily striped, her cigarette holder waving a twelve-inch arch from between her very white and very clenched teeth, her fingers rattling lightly over the keys of a white-and-gold grand piano.

Helen doesn't get much footage in "Troilus and Cressida," but that first image—rolling toward us under swaying Japanese lanterns—is audacious and absolutely defined. So is the picture of the oily Pandarus, making his illicit love matches with the tilt of a cane, the tip of a high grey topper, and the prissy, drawling smirk of a fellow who can't help eyeing the local bellboys between his more routine assignments.

In this new dispensation, Priam becomes a pip-squeak in boots much too big for him, Ajax an apple-cheeked Colonel Blimp who emits little "haws" after his more pompous speeches and Agamemnon an overweight tyrant with precisely-spiked Kaiser Bill mustaches. Behind them all the garish blues, reds and golds of a turn-of-the-century painted toy theater sends its stiff, crinkled draperies soaring to the gilded crests above.

The pictures are firmly, fantastically composed. I wish I could say they did something to stamp a clear, bold meaning on Shakespeare's cynical, defiantly complex portrait of a world in which there is "nothing but lechery." They don't, really. The orchestrally clicked heels the football-match cheering sessions that accompany the various battles are colorful enough in themselves, they are more nearly distractions than shrewd illuminations. Ulysses isn't a sharper etching for having to light a pipe during one of his longer musings; Thersites scrawling crayoned boils onto a billboard-size photograph of Agamemnon doesn't necessarily take on the intellectual asperity of a scabrous philosopher in the process.

And there may even be a sense in which the inventive cartooning makes "Troilus and Cressida" less intelligible, less immediate than it might have been. The ominous forebodings of Cassandra, the whole long business of the challenge to single combat—these must be forcibly re-translated back into the Greek if chaos is to be kept comfortably around the corner.

The vixen Cressida, of course, has little difficulty in bridging the years between. As Rosemary Harris plays her, she is a fetchingly silken, merrily amoral wench who is quite honest with each man she loves—moment by moment—and the scene in which she first meets Troilus has a fine, mercurial wantonness about it.

Otherwise, though, the successes of the evening are apt to come in those sequences which are played straight: Richard Wordsworth's Ulysses painting a decayed future for Achilles; Paul Rogers' Pandarus sighing wearily as he learns that the young lovers are to be separated; Jack Gwillim and Ernest Hare hurling violent insults at one another as the fabled Hector and Achilles finally clash.

Mr. Guthrie is a master of theatrical trickery. But the secret of "Troilus and Cressida" is still up Shakespeare's sleeve.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
December 27, 1956

Shakespeare Given de Woiks in A Farcical 'Troilus and Cressida'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It could be that the city's license commissioner, Bernard J. O'Connell, was looking for burleycue in the wrong theatre last evening. He was down on Second Ave. and 4th St. at the Columbia Theatre, keeping a watch-and-ward-ful eye on the reopening of burlesque in our fair city, when he should have been uptown taking a gander at the Old Vic Company's new production of Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida."

According to my colleague, Douglas Watt, the downtown rinkydink was downright dull. Uptown, it was immense, thanks to the irreverent and screwball staging of director Tyrone Guthrie. Not since Basil Sydney and Mary Ellis offered their modern dress version of "The Taming of the Shrew" in the 1920s has Shakespeare had such a jolly shaking-up. And not since Gilbert kissed Garbo has there been such frank love-making.

Tragedy or Farce?

"Troilus and Cressida" has had only one other professional production in New York—a Players' revival done in sober style in 1932 with Otis Skinner, Charles Coburn, Edith Barrett and Blanche Yurka in the cast—so any competent presentation of it is news.

Pundits dating as far back as Dryden have considered the play as another of the bard's tragedies. Dr. Guthrie thinks it is a satirical comedy—and he proved it last evening at the Winter Garden. Under his staging the play does have its serious moments, and even some beautiful ones, but in the main it is a happy-go-lucky farce in which both time and sense get all mixed up.

Shakespeare was writing about Homer's old Trojan War. Guthrie has moved the fracas up to 1913 or 1914 or thereabout and has, in part, costumed it accordingly. The invading Greeks appear to be a batch of Prussians, with Agamemnon looking like Kaiser Wilhelm and Ajax resembling Eric von Stroheim. Ulysses, the philosopher, dresses like von Tirpitz and smokes a big meerschaum.

An Amorous Dish

The defending Trojans seem not quite so modern or ferocious. Troilus is a dreamy lad in cloak and sword, and Cressida's uncle, Pandarus, is a dapper gentleman who carries horse-track binoculars. When the big battle comes at the end, the invaders are using cannon and fixed bayonets, and the heroic Achilles is just a gangster who looks like Mike Todd.

Such goings-on may be shocking to purists, but Guthrie, the Old Vic cast and I had a grand time last evening. Rosemary Harris is indeed a tasty and amorous dish as Cressida. Coral Browne, in her one brief moment as Helen of Troy, is a strumpet playing a honky-tonk piano.

On the more serious level there are some fine and generally straight performances—the Cassandra of Margaret Courtenay, the Ulysses of Richard Wordsworth, the Ajax of Ernest Hare and the Troilus of Jeremy Brett among them. Paul Rogers' Pandarus is an enormously comic impersonation.

It's a big company and there is big scenery, and "Troilus and Cressida" is a worthy successor to "The Matchmaker," which Guthrie also directed.